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One Day at a Time: Supporting a Family Member with PTSD

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(7 COMMENTS)

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Author and brother

When my kid brother left for Iraq he was just that — a kid.

He returned home shattered inside. The “dark pit,” as he calls it, was hidden underneath his gruff, infantry-tattooed exterior. No one in our family could have predicted what he would experience or the after-effects that continue to haunt him today.

Many Sailors, Soldiers, Marines and Airmen return from deployments with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. As a family member of a person suffering

from PTSD, we must be strong for them in a variety of ways to help them combat the disorder.

I received an up-close and personal look at how it can affect a person, when my younger brother came to live with me after separating from the U.S. Army.

Shortly after graduating from the U. S. Army Infantry School at Fort Benning, Ga., my younger brother found his newly-issued boots on the sandy ground in Mosul, Iraq — during a time that would turn out to be one of the bloodiest during the war. His main duties were to provide infantry support to convoys, security detail, and to locate and apprehend insurgents.

He came home with an inescapable burden on his back. He continually woke up, drenched in sweat, with nightmares so real he could still see the terrifying images in his dark room. His mind was filled with the lives he had to take, the friends he lost — some to the enemy, some to suicide — and the near-misses of death’s cold, bony grip on his own neck.

He talked to no one about the sleepless nights and the recurring feelings of depression and hopelessness. The stigma associated with being diagnosed with PTSD kept him from seeking help. The disorder eventually caused him to exit the Army before his enlistment was up. A short time later he’d be living in my finished basement, as my wife and I adjusted to life with our two kids and a newly discharged war veteran.

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My brother would continually become overwhelmed with routine things like paying his bills, getting up for work or dealing with relationships. PTSD was winning the battle against him, and he did not know how to fight back.

Even after he hung up his uniform, he still carried himself like an invincible Infantry Soldier. Deep down he knew he needed help, but was still too afraid, ashamed and overwhelmed to seek it.

The year he spent with us was an extremely trying time. As he was learning how to get better, we were learning how to help him. Being a family member of someone who has been diagnosed with combat-related PTSD can be difficult, but the most important thing we did was to provide a stable support system for him.

There were times my brother could be so frustrating that we would get into screaming matches. He would peel out of the neighborhood, the screech of his car tires echoing through the house, and I would pray he came home that night. His behavior became more erratic. I helped him apply for jobs. He would hold one for a short time and then quit, normally after losing his temper or becoming fed-up with it. All of these actions are a correlation to the internal fight he was struggling with.

After much convincing by my wife and I, he finally overcame his fear of the stigma associated with the disorder and went to the local Veterans Affairs medical center, where he was evaluated and given a service-connected disability for PTSD, as well as for injuring his back while deployed, but most importantly access to the tools and programs to fight it.

The nightmares still remained. We continued our support. I gathered research on the subject, finding that a mix of therapy, medication and a healthy lifestyle could decrease the effects. He started taking a prescribed medication and would speak with social workers at the VA hospital regularly. I dragged him to workouts with me and would create healthy athletic competition for us, including intramural sports, which was something he enjoyed and looked forward to all week. We made sure he remembered his appointments, encouraged him in his work and most importantly, ensured that he knew he was a valuable part of our family dynamic. I tried to keep him from getting overwhelmed by telling him to take things “one day at a time.” It became a mantra for us.

It’s been a few years since my brother was in Iraq with an M4 slung over his shoulder. And he’s a long way from the 8-year-old who dugfoxholes in my mother’s backyard while dreaming of being a Soldier. He would never take back his time in the Army and believes very much in his mission in Iraq. When he eventually made me one of the few people he shared his experiences with, he confessed with tear-filled eyes of times he came close to taking his own life. He assured me that war is not glorious or heroic. He did what he had to do because the Soldiers serving beside him needed him, and each one of them would have done the same thing, he said.

After a year with us, he had gotten his PTSD under control, with help from the VA and support from his family. He continues to maintain his appointments, takes his medication, works out on a regular basis and has a steady job. He is living on his own and is still fighting hard.

While there is no clear cut route to helping a family member with combat-related PTSD, the one thing we can do for those close to us who are suffering, is to offer support. Without his family, I don’t know where my brother would be today – if he would even be alive. But I do know that he is winning the war — one day at a time.

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Dallas Robinson

This was a very well written piece. I hope it Navy Med finds a way to publish this so that it can reach more readers. For every war veteran, there are a dozen friends and/or family members that need to be better educated in PTSD. Please do your part to publisize this article so that it can reach others

Mary E. Hoettels, USAR, LTC, Retired

Dear Paul,

It is easy to be married, take in family members or do anything when everything and everyone is doing well.

It hard to do any of these things when circumstances change and the loved one(s) are not doing well due chronic health problems out of your control.

You chose to stand by your brother and to walk with him through the long road of finding a new definition of self and what is normal for your brother. The tremendous amount of work on your part is well documented.

It also required the support of your wife to allow your brother to heal in a safe and loving home.

Not everyone is comfortable having a family member needing support in the presence of children. Your children witnessed your example that one takes time to help a family member and that it is an important part of being a responsible adult. Compassion knows no age restrictions.

Your decision to step up and care for your brother is an example for this country to do for all our veterans returning home. Even with VA resources, knowing that you are cared and love by family is an important link in the healing process. If a veteran does not have a family, individuals who have an extra room or living area could provide support for that veteran during their healing.

I speak from experience. My husband served two tours in Viet Nam and had his PTSD surface in 1988. It has never gone back into its box. My PTSD emerged in 2003 and it also is still here. My one daughter has served three combat tours, to include both Afganistan and Iraq. Like your brother, her PTSD is there. It would have been easy to walk out at any time but love and caring keeps us always looking out for the other.

This article should be printed and distributed to family support groups, chaplains, VA and Vet Center websites and printed materials.

I wish you, your family and your brother peace and contentment.

Eric Walrabenstein

Thanks for the illuminating article. Too often those who support our returning heroes are forgotten. It's can be a daunting challenge to support those suffering from PTS; it's important that we all keep our warriors as well as their their loved one who give them such incredible support in our hearts and minds. More help will soon be available on line at bootstrapUSA.com

no way out 2012

You are so awesome! I do not think I've read anything like that before. So great to find somebody with some unique thoughts on this subject matter. Really.. thanks for starting this up. This web site is something that is required on the internet, someone with a bit of originality!

justin

Hello all. I am retired British Army and now training as a psychotherapist in England. You all seem to have forgotten that you americans invented a very effective (and evidence based) treatment for PTSD called EMDR (eye movement desensitisation reprocessing). For anyone suffering that has not tried this, I implore you to google and find a qualified EMDR therapist to help you. The DoD use it, but a bit sketchy with the VA? I would be interesting to hear any of your stories involving EMDR – good and bad – at

Sandi Capra

Your brother is a lucky man to have such a wonderful brother. There is hope for recovery from PTSD. At K9s For Warriors we provide and train service dogs for our troops & veterans suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress and Traumatic Brain Injuries. Every month we run a three week intensive academy where our warriors spend 120 hours training with their new service dog, we reintroduce them to civilian society with dignity and independence.

These warriors deserve our help! We are a small non-profit with a big mission and watching our heroes start their road to recovery with their new forever partner by their side is the most rewarding work I have ever done. We help warriors from around the country regain their freedom and independence, the very things they fought for this great country for.

To learn more about K9s For Warriors please visit our website

Please thank your brother for his service.

Christine Leonhardt

This article is amazing- and I so agree there are so many that could benefit from this article!! PTSD needs TLC – our troops are out there protecting us...and they need our full support as they return home!! God Bless- this article is so touching and so INFORMATIVE!rkeyPH

Sincerely,

Christine Leonhardt

Peer Recovery Specialist- Mental Health